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## Commission to help plan for growth in WNC

*By Nanci Bompey*

A commission created by state lawmakers aims to encourage growth and development in the mountains while preserving the region's natural resources.

The General Assembly recently gave final approval to the Mountain Resources Act. The legislation, which is awaiting Gov. Bev Perdue's signature, creates a Mountain Resources Commission tasked with coordinating local mountain planning efforts.

"The idea of the bill is that we have a lot going on in the mountains that is really unique to the mountains, but we didn't have a single point of coordination for all the efforts that are going on or for housing all of these discussions," said DJ Gerken, senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, which helped to draft the legislation.

The commission will not have regulatory authority but will make recommendations and help find resources for local and state governments, while also building on the work of similar efforts around the region. The commission could work on issues like steep-slope regulations, floodplain mapping and farmland preservation, among other land-use topics.

Sen. Joe Sam Queen, D-Haywood, said the commission will help give Western North Carolina a single voice at both the state and national levels.

"I very much intend (for) this commission to set an agenda and go after federal funds and state funds for WNC's most needed priorities," he said. "Coming together is the first priority. We as a region have a lot of common challenges that are not appreciated in Raleigh and Washington, and we need to articulate them."

Commission members will be from the mountain counties and will come from local governments; the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area; the North Carolina National Parks, Parkways and Forests Development Council; the tourism industry; and the land trust community.

Money for the commission was deleted from the bill, but lawmakers hope to fund the commission in upcoming sessions of the General Assembly.

Vicki Greene, assistant director at the Southwestern Commission, a council of government for the seven most western counties, said that having a coordinated effort like the commission has been needed for decades, but it is only recently that there has been enough public support for land-use planning in the mountains.

"We have seen a change in attitude of folks who are elected officials and some of the general public in that they are more accepting now that resources are limited and they understand that if we don't take care of them, they won't be around for future generations," she said.

Joe McKinney, executive director of the Land-of-Sky Regional Council, said the commission will help leaders in WNC control what happens in the mountains.

"We will have control over our own destiny," he said. "There has to be some coordinated planning in WNC. If not, we'll be told by the state government in Raleigh what to do."